

# REVIEWS FROM ALBANY



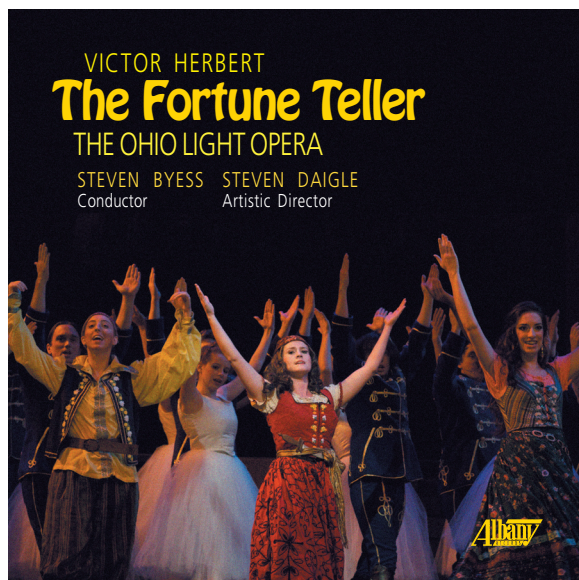
March / April 2012

**HERBERT** *The Fortune Teller* • Steven Byess, conductor; Amy Maples (Musette/Irma); Stephen Faulk (Capt. Ladislas); David Kelleher-Flight (Sandor); Elisa Matthews (Mlle. Pompon); Logan Walsh (Count); Gary Moss (Fresco); Ohio Light Opera Festival ALBANY 1326/27 (2 CDs: 103:59 ) Live: Wooster 2011

Irish-born and German-trained Victor Herbert was a relative newcomer to the New York music scene in the 1890s but already a consummate musician, fertile tunesmith, and expert orchestrator. It is little wonder that his gifts were recognized quickly and that in less than 10 years after his arrival on these shores he was being given opportunities to compose for the flourishing musical theater in New York City. His paradigm was based on the Viennese operas of Franz von Suppé, Johann Strauss Jr., and others, with a dash of Offenbach and a pinch of Gilbert and Sullivan added, but written to English texts and American tastes. He was so successful at this task he produced the music for more than 40 stage works, more than Strauss, Lehár, and Kalman, more than Sullivan, Rodgers, Kern, and Romberg. He is known as the Father of American Operetta and the work here,

*The Fortune Teller*, was among his first major successes. Written for the newly formed Alice Nielson Comic Opera Company and its attractive young star of the same name, *The Fortune Teller* premiered in Toronto in September 1898 and moved to New York 12 days later, opening at Wallack's Theater on September 26 to much acclaim.

The libretto is typical operetta fare. Irma, a pupil in a Budapest Opera House ballet school, is heiress to a large fortune. Unbeknownst to her, Count Berezowski, a penniless member of the nobility, discovers this and determines to marry Irma, with the aid of the ballet master, Fresco, whom he will bribe with a cut of the booty. But Irma and her beau, Captain Ladislas, a Hungarian hussar, have other ideas, and they run away, she to take on the role of her twin brother, Fedor, who has apparently deserted from Ladislas's regiment (don't ask—it's even more complicated) and faces a court martial if discovered missing. Immediately thereafter turn up a band of itinerant Gypsies with a look-alike for Irma, the Gypsy fortune-teller Musette. The Count is overjoyed, believing his dancer heiress has returned, and claims her for his own. The Gypsies are quite happy to "sell" Musette to Fresco as Irma's stand-in, knowing well the headstrong Gypsy girl will do whatever she pleases. Musette becomes intrigued with the idea of being a rich Countess, but she also has a boyfriend, Sandor, who finds little humor in the whole situation. Irma's missing brother Fedor also has a girlfriend, the abandoned Mlle. Pompon, who arrives to further add to the confusion. Needless to say, all of this complicated silliness is resolved in the third act and



everyone is matched up satisfactorily, and the no-account Count is foiled in his attempt to grab the girl and the money. The librettist is careful not to schedule appearances of Irma, Musette, or Fedor at the same time, for they are all to be played by the same singer/actress.

I have not heard the Ohio Light Opera Company previously, but its production of *The Fortune Teller* is a pretty good one. In Amy Maples, who plays the dual (or triple) leads in this operetta, they have identified a very good one; her light, lyric soprano voice is a perfect fit for operetta, and she excels here. The Sandor of David Kelleher-Flight also stands out for his fine singing; his *Gypsy Lullaby* in act II is a disc highlight. Less easy on the ear are the Count of Logan Walsh and the *Fresco*, sung by veteran Gary Moss—they both do manage to sing passably in their smaller roles, but their real contributions are in providing much of the comedic charm of the work. The pit orchestra plays well for the most part but sounds underpowered at times. An English libretto is provided with the booklet.

With the few European record labels participating in this genre more interested in reviving Viennese, German, and French works, I am highly appreciative of Albany Records and the folks in Wooster for reviving and recording some of the American classics of the musical stage as well, even if Ohio Light Opera often performs and records the European classics in addition. I will certainly be investigating other recorded productions by the company, including other Herbert works, in the near future; they seem to have been well covered in the pages of *Fanfare*.

**Recommended.** *Bill White*